For carved figure at the prow of a ship, see Figurehead (object).

In politics, a **figurehead** is a person who holds *de jure* (in name or by law) an important title or office (often supremely powerful), yet *de facto* (in reality) executes little actual power. The metaphor derives from the carved figurehead at the prow of a sailing ship. Commonly cited figureheads include Queen Elizabeth II,[1][2] who is Queen of sixteen Commonwealth realms and head of the Commonwealth, but has no power over the nations in which she is not head of state and does not exercise power in her own realms on her own initiative. Other figureheads are the Emperor of Japan, the King of Sweden, or presidents in some parliamentary republics, such as the President of India, President of Israel, President of Bangladesh, President of Greece, President of Germany, President of Pakistan, and the President of the People's Republic of China (without CPC General Secretary and Chairman of CMC posts).

General description

While the authority of a figurehead is in practice generally symbolic or ceremonial, public opinion, respect for the office or the office holder, and access to high levels of government can give them significant influence on events; such as giving advice to their ministers or warning them. Sometimes, a figurehead with reserve powers can be exploited in times of emergency. For example, Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi used the figurehead President of India to issue unilateral decrees that allowed her to bypass parliament when it no longer supported her.

During the crisis of the March on Rome in 1922, King Victor Emmanuel III of Italy, though a figurehead, played a key role in handing power to Benito Mussolini. More than 20 years later, the same King Victor Emmanuel III of Italy played a key role in the dismissal of Benito Mussolini in 1943. Since the abolition of monarchy in Italy and the establishment of a republic in 1946, the Italian President assumed most of the ceremonial functions of the previous kings; however, the Italian President retains large powers in appointing a prime minister of his choice when in parliament there's no clear majority government, creating a so-called "president's cabinet" (a technocratic cabinet). For example, the former Prime Minister of Italy, Sen Mario Monti, was appointed by the Italian President Giorgio Napolitano as a lifetime-senator and then as Prime Minister of the country, not after a new election. Italian President's powers and influence are so much stronger is the weaker political parties' leadership. This system is called "accordion ".

Conversely, King Juan Carlos I of Spain, also largely considered a figurehead, had in 1981 a

key role in defending the newborn Spanish democracy and foiling the attempted coup d'état, known as "23-F".

As a derogatory term

The word can also have more sinister overtones, and refer to a powerful leader, who should be exercising full authority, who is actually being controlled by a more powerful figure behind the throne.

See also

- de jure
- Executive (government)
- Head of State
- Post turtle

References

1. ^ [redacted], by John Bowman, CBC News Online | Oct. 4, 2002
2. ^ [redacted], by Jeffrey Stinson, USA Today, | May 3, 2006 @5:22 PM ET